mother was hugging one of her children—I think it was her youngest son.

Santiago himself now visited El Mozote with his “mobile unit,” and broadcast a description of the devastation, saying that “it looks as if a cyclone had passed through”; that from the ruins of the sacristy came “a penetrating odor that indicated that beneath . . . were to be found who knows how many cadavers of the people of El Mozote”; and that in the shattered building he could see “macabre scenes, hunks of human hair, and fingers amid the rubble.”

Late in December, the F.M.L.N. got in touch with Raymond Bonner, of the Times, and informed him that his longstanding request to visit guerrilla-held territory would be approved; he would be welcome to come to Morazán in early January. Also around that time, a guerrilla patrol stumbled upon some campeños cowering in a ravine, and discovered among them a near-hysterical woman of thirty-eight, whose legs and arms and face were scored with cuts. The peasants said that they had come upon her near a river—found her crouched there nearly naked, her limbs and body smeared with blood and covered with thorns. “I could hardly speak,” Rufina Amaya recalls. “I talked and cried, talked and cried—couldn’t eat, couldn’t drink, just babbled and cried and talked to God.”

Now the guerrillas had found her, and they rejoiced when they realized who she was. “They were all happy that there was at least one survivor,” Rufina says. “They all came up around me and hugged me. I didn’t know what was going on, who they were, what they wanted.” She was taken to El Zapotal and interviewed, and before long the voice of Rufina Amaya, telling in careful detail the story of what had happened in El Mozote, was broadcast throughout El Salvador.

On December 31st, the General Command of the Morazán front of the F.M.L.N., issued a “call to the International Red Cross, the O.A.S. Human Rights Commission, and the international press to verify the genocide of more than nine hundred Salvadorans” in El Mozote and the surrounding hamlets.

“We ask these organizations to be the eyes of the world’s conscience,” the comandantes said.

That night, at the same time that Radio Venceremos was broadcasting a Mass “in memory of the thousand massacred,” El Salvador’s provisional President, José Napoleón Duarte, felt obliged to take to the airwaves and deny the accusations personally. The entire massacre story, he said, was “a guerrilla trick” meant to smear his government at the very moment when the United States Congress was considering aid to El Salvador.

Duarte was right in at least one respect: though the El Mozote controversy appeared to center on what had happened in a handful of hamlets in a remote region of El Salvador, the real point of focus had shifted to Washington—and, in particular, to Congress, which was perceived as the weak spot in the armor of the Salvadoran government. It was Congress that voted the money that paid for the American guns and helicopters and military advisers; and in recent years, as the atrocities had grown ever more frequent, Congress had done so with increasing reluctance. Two days before Duarte’s speech, Reagan had signed Congress’s amendment of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, which required the President to “certify” that the Salvadoran government “is making a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights” and “is achieving substantial control over all elements of its own armed forces, so as to bring to an end the indiscriminate torture and murder of Salvadoran citizens by these forces.” If such a certification was not delivered to Congress by January 29th, and convincingly defended, all funds and assistance for El Salvador would be immediately suspended.

Now all sides prepared for the debate over certification, which would provide concerned congressmen, church leaders, heads of human-rights groups, and others with a new opportunity to document the abuses committed by the Salvadoran government in prosecuting the war. Administration officials, meanwhile, both in Washington and in the Embassy in San Salvador, prepared to defend the government and demonstrate that, despite appearances, the Salvadorans were improving in their respect for human rights. Many of these officials viewed the certification requirement with singular contempt.

“If Congress felt so strongly about human-rights abuses, it could have simply cut off aid,” Elliott Abrams, who had just been sworn in as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, told me. “But Congress didn’t cut off aid, because it didn’t want to risk being blamed, if the guerrillas won as a result, for ‘losing’ El Sal-
vador. Instead, they required certification—which is to say, they agreed to fund the war while reserving the right to call us Fascists." Deanne Hinton, the United States Ambassador at the time, later told an interviewer that he viewed certification “as a way for the Congress . . . to be for and against something at the same time.” He went on to say that congressmen “didn’t want to take the responsibility to deny resources to the government of El Salvador and on the other hand they didn’t want to endorse it, so they created a certification procedure and made the rest of us jump through the hoop, and the President had to certify it,” and added, “It is a political cop-out by a lot of congressmen.”

At the root of this “political cop-out,” in the unspoken view of many Administration officials, was a simple truth: that when it came down to either supporting the Salvadoran government, however unseemly its methods, or allowing a victory by the guerrillas the choice was clear—and the only difference between the people in the Administration and the hypocrites in Congress was that the Reagan officials were not afraid to say it straight out. Abrams told me, “I used to say to people, ‘I mean, I can see arguing for an F.M.L.N. victory on political grounds or economic grounds—but on human-rights grounds? I mean, that’s crazy.’” Abrams stood the human-rights argument on its head, contending that to argue for an aid cutoff was, in effect, to argue for a guerrilla victory, and that at the end of the day, however badly the Salvadoran government behaved, those collective atrocities could never approach the general disaster for human rights that an F.M.L.N. victory would represent.

 Abrams was not alone in taking this line of argument, which appears to have been aimed at persuading those—conservative Democrats most prominently—who, however much they deplored human-rights abuses in El Salvador, nonetheless worried about taking the blame for any advance of Communism in the hemisphere. The day after the certification was delivered to Congress, the State Department sent out a cable, over Secretary of State Haig’s name, urging American diplomats to describe the El Salvador policy as “a grit-your-teeth policy: to support a reformist junta, with a lot of bad eggs in and around it, in order to avoid a Somosa-Sandinista choice. For critics to narrow their focus to the teeth-gritting without considering the policy’s larger aims is shallow and unfair.” For those who “can’t take” the current Salvadoran government, Haig wrote, “the honest response is not to say the junta is—surprise—beset and flawed, but rather to make the case that it’s acceptable to the United States if El Salvador goes the Cuban way.”

It was against this background that Ambassador Hinton and the State Department began receiving reports about a massacre in Morazán. “Coming on top of everything else, El Mozote, if true, might have destroyed the entire effort,” Thomas O. Enders, the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, told me. “Who knows? I certainly thought that when I first heard about it.”

The Embassy began a counterattack, following a pattern that it held to throughout: undermining the reports not by investigating the facts but by casting doubt on their source. In response to the request from the Reverend Wipfle, of the National Council of Churches, Hinton cabled back, on January 8th, that he did “not know what your sources are but the only sources that I have seen alleging something like this are clandestine Radio Venceremos reports.” The Ambassador then quoted in full a heavily-handled Venceremos text from January 2nd, in which El Mozote was compared repeatedly to My Lai; added that he “found it interesting” that a guerrilla communiqué two days earlier had not mentioned El Mozote at all; and concluded that he did not “consider Radio Venceremos to be a reliable source.”

Hinton—who declined to be interviewed for this account—must have known that the National Council of Churches could not have got its information from Radio Venceremos. (Among other things, Wipfle’s cable was sent before the station had resumed broadcasting.) He himself had probably already received reports from sources of his own that something had happened in Morazán; after all, no fewer than ten American advisers were working with the Atlacatl at the time. According to one of them, members of the Milgroup—the Military Advisory Group at the Embassy—had telephoned the Atlacatl base in La Libertad within a few days of the massacre. “They called up and talked to the Special Forces people and told them they wanted Monterrosa to come in—they wanted to talk to him about something that had happened during the operation,” this adviser told me. “But Monterrosa just climbed into his helicopter and said, ‘If they want to talk to me, I’ll be out with my troops.’ He wasn’t going to go in and talk to those guys. He said, ‘If I go in and let them talk to me about this thing, I’ll never be able to get anyone to go out there and fight for me again.’ And then he got into his helicopter and took off”—heading back to Morazán.

How had the Milgroup officers heard so quickly that “something had happened in Morazán? Although the adviser believes it was the guerrillas who got word to the Embassy, a number of highly placed Salvadorans, including one prominent politician of the time who had many friends among senior officials, claim that two American advisers were actually observing the operation from the base camp at Osicala. On its face, the charge is not entirely implausible—American advisers had been known to violate the prohibition against accompanying their charges into the field—but it is impossible to confirm. Colonel Moody Hayes, who was then the Milgroup commander, refused to discuss El Mozote with me, explaining that he didn’t know “what might still be classified,” while officers from the defense attaché’s office and from Milgroup who were willing to talk generally dismissed the charge as unfounded. State Department officials, however, were clearly worried about the possibility. “Certainly, one of the issues I remember raising between us and the Embassy was, Were there any American advisers on this sortie?” Enders said. “The Embassy made a great effort to talk to advisers who were with the Atlacatl to try to find out the truth.”

Of course, had the truth been that Americans were at Osicala, it would have been a very hard truth to make public—or, for that matter, to confide to a superior. The officers involved would surely have known, as Enders conceded, that admitting such an unfortunate misjudgment “would have ruined those guys’ careers—they would have been cashiered. So no one’s going to volunteer, ‘Hey, I was up there.’” By the same token, Embassy officials would have been acutely aware of the effect such a revelation would have had on the entire American
effort in El Salvador. "It would have been devastating," Enders said. "American advisers with a unit that committed an atrocity? Devastating. Can you imagine anything more corrosive of the entire military effort?" Coming at such a time, it might well have made the Salvadoran war, in Enders' expression, "unfundable." Enders insists, however, that "given the small numbers of advisers involved, if they'd been there we would have known about it."

Sometime in mid-December of 1981, "contacts of great confidence on the left" approached Todd Greentree, the junior reporting officer, and told him that a massacre had taken place in Morazán. Greentree knew of Operation Rescue from the defense attache's reports but knew nothing about a massacre. "I first heard about it from the left," Greentree, who is now the Nicaragua desk officer at the State Department, says. "The most important thing was that they offered me a special safe-conduct to go up there and see it for myself. Obviously, a decision had been taken very high up in the F.M.L.N. to do this for propaganda purposes. I knew the guerrillas would never have masqueraded something like this, would never have fabricated it, if they were offering safe-conduct. I was convinced that something had gone on, and that it was bad. I mean, it was pretty clear, if they were going to do this, that something must have happened."

Greentree conveyed this message from the left to Ambassador Hinton. A meeting was held. "His response was 'No, you can't do this under guerrilla escort,'" Greentree says. "'That would be too risky, and you would just be playing into their hands.' I mean, I should emphasize that I never got the feeling that they just wanted this to go away. But there were political and military constraints that we were operating under."

Kenneth Bleakley, who was the deputy chief of mission, told me "Todd was a very courageous young officer, but it was just too much of a risk to send somebody out there."

The decision was clearly the Ambassador's to make. Peter Romero, who was an El Salvador specialist at the State Department, says, "However much we might have wanted more information, no one in State was going to make that call. It was clearly the Ambassador's call. And at the time, basically, the Embassy staff down there were targets—they were targeted by the F.M.L.N."

Greentree was unable to accept the guerrillas' offer to visit El Mozote and have a look for himself. But, as he soon learned, two other Americans were about to do just that.

Late on the evening of January 3rd, in the mountains near the Salvadoran border, a dusty car pulled to a stop and disgorged into the barren Honduran landscape two Americans in hiking boots. They slung their backpacks on the ground, stretched, and after a few moments of searching found a boy who had been waiting for them—their F.M.L.N. contact. The boy led them into the quiet darkness, heading down a rocky trail to the bank of a river. In the moonlight, the three stripped and, holding their clothing and their packs above their heads, picked their way unsteadily through the rushing cold water until they reached the far shore—and the border of the guerrilla-held Department of Morazán.

"I was scared," Raymond Bonner said. "All I could think was, The military, what if the military ambushes us?"

It was not an idle fear; Bonner, of the New York Times, and the photographer Susan Meiselas—together with Alma Guillermoprieto, of the Washington Post, who followed them into Morazán ten days later—would be the first members of the American establishment press to report on the Salvadoran war from the guerrilla side.

Bonner and Guillermoprieto had both been working hard for months to arrange a trip in, lobbying through F.M.L.N. contacts in Mexico and New York as well as in El Salvador. In early December, they had finally seen their trips confirmed, only to have them cancelled after the start of Operation Rescue. Later that month, Bonner's contacts had informed him that the trip was on again. "To the charge that the guerrillas took us in to report on the massacre, I'd say now, 'You're damn right they did,'" he said. "But at the time I didn't really know about the massacre."

Bonner telephoned Meiselas, who was in New York, and, in a magnanimous gesture, before flying to Tegucigalpa also put in a call to Guillermoprieto, in Mexico City, who immediately resumed her own "desperate, intense, round-the-clock phone lobbying" with her F.M.L.N. contacts. Ten days later, after rendezvousing with a guerrilla contact in the Tegucigalpa market, she found herself being deposited "under a bush in the middle of the night" near the Honduran border, along with a pile of supplies.

Bonner and Meiselas, and Guillermoprieto, describe the trip in the same way: hiking all night through the moonlit mountains, and at dawn coming upon the first guerrilla camp—a scattering of tents, under pine trees, that held twenty-five or thirty people. By dawn on the third day—January 6th—Bonner and Meiselas had reached the area of El Mozote. "There were bodies and parts of bodies," Meiselas said. "We saw about twenty-five houses destroyed around Arambala and El Mozote. My strongest memory was this grouping of evangelicals, fourteen of them, who had come together thinking their faith would protect them. They were strewn across the earth next to a cornfield, and you could see on their faces the horror of what had happened to them."

At a burial near El Zapotal, they were introduced to Rufina Amaya, and Bonner interviewed her at length. A few days later, the guerrillas gave him a handwritten list, which they said contained the names of those who had died at El Mozote and in the surrounding hamlets. "I did the tally, came up with the number seven hundred, tried to get the number of men, women, and children, got a sample of names," Bonner said.

A few days later, Bonner and Meiselas began the hike back to Honduras. At the middle camp, they met a battered Guillermoprieto, one of whose legs was swollen from an accident involving a rock and a mule. At just about the time Bonner reached Mexico City and began to file his stories, Guillermoprieto was nearing El Mozote.

"We started smelling it from Arambala," she said. "These kids started leading me down paths and pointing to houses and saying again and again, 'Aquí hay muertos, aquí hay muertos.' The most traumatizing thing was looking at these little houses where whole families had been blown away—these recognizable human beings, in their little dresses, just lying there mummifying in the sun. We kept walking, got to El Mozote. We walked down these charming and beautiful roads, then to the center of town, where there was this kind of rubble.
place”—the sacrilege—and, in it, a stupefying number of bones. There was a charred wooden beam lying on top of the bodies, and there were bones sticking up, and pieces of flesh. You could see vertebrae and femurs sticking out. No attempt had been made to bury the bodies.

In some shock, she was led to La Guacamaya. “Everyone there had lost someone in his family—everyone—and everyone was in a state of controlled hysteria.”

The great exodus that had begun with the offensive in mid-December was still under way. “It was that massacre, the most horrible, that really caused the glass of water to overflow,” Licho told me. “People flowed out of the zone, either toward Honduras or south toward Gotera or into the guerrillas. A lot of people joined us as combatants then.”

At the urging of Jonás, the guerrilla commander, Guillermoprieto saw Rufina the next day. Later, she spoke to two young men who had seen their families murdered in La Joya. Then, thinking of Bonner and his head start, she scribbled her story in her notebook, folded up the pages, and hid them in a plastic film cannister. She found a guerrilla courier and persuaded him, with some difficulty, to carry the precious cargo to Tegucigalpa and deliver it to a colleague, who could telephone the story into the Post.

On January 26th, the day Guillermoprieto got back to Tegucigalpa, the Times ran Bonner’s first story from Morazán, headlined “WITH SALVADOR’S REBELS IN COMBAT ZONE.” Guillermoprieto had already been on the telephone to the Post’s foreign editor, and they managed to get her El Mozote story, along with a Meiselas photograph of the rubble of the sacrilege, onto the front page of the first edition of the next day’s paper—eighteen hundred words, headlined “SALVADORAN PEASANTS DESCRIBE MASS KILLING; WOMAN TELLS OF CHILDREN’S DEATH.” Editors in the Times’ Washington bureau, seeing the piece in the Post’s early edition, telephoned New York, where Bonner’s El Mozote story had been awaiting editing at the foreign desk. Craig Whitney, then the deputy foreign editor, and the deskmen managed to rush Bonner’s slightly shorter article, headlined “MASSACRE OF HUNDREDS REPORTED IN SALVADOR VILLAGE,” into the paper’s late edition. Six weeks after the massacre, El Mozote had made it onto the front pages of America’s two most important newspapers.

The following day, Ronald Reagan sent to Congress the Administration’s certification that the government of El Salvador was “making a concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights.”

Two days later, on January 30th, Todd Greentree drove out to Ilopango Airport, climbed into a Salvadoran Army Alouette helicopter, and in a few minutes was sweeping over green volcanic landscape toward the mountains of Morazán. At his side was Major John McKay, of the defense attaché’s office. A one-eyed marine (he had been wounded in Vietnam), McKay was known to have the best contacts among the Salvadoran officers of any American in the country. The two men were headed for El Mozote to have a look for themselves.

It was not the most propitious time. The Army was tense; three days before, guerrilla commandos had stormed Ilopango in a daring raid and had succeeded in destroying a large part of El Salvador’s Air Force as it sat on the tarmac. The raid—which the guerrillas named Operation Martyrs of Heroic Morazán, in honor of those killed in December—would not look good in Washington. The congressional debate loomed large in the minds of those in the United States Embassy. “It was in the middle of a phenomenally packed, intense period down there,” Greentree recently told me by telephone. “We had the investigation of the murders of the nuns, we had the Constituent Assembly elections coming up, and, of course, we had the certification”—which only intensified the pressure from “the political microscope in the States,” as Greentree called it. “The primary policy objective at the time was to get the certification through,” he said, and the spectacular reports of the massacre threatened the certification. “From the Embassy’s point of view, the guerrillas were trying to make us look as bad as possible. They wanted to shut the whole thing down.”

The Americans landed at the brigade command in San Miguel to refuel and to receive their first briefing. “The brigade commander was expecting us,” Greentree said. “In San Miguel, that was Flores”—Colonel Jaime Ernesto Flores Grijalba, the over-all commander of Operation Rescue. Also present, Greentree believes—he is not absolutely certain—was Domingo Monterrosa. The officers gave the Americans “a sort of after-action report, saying which units were where,” Greentree said. “As I recall, the Atlacatl was the main combat unit, and they talked about this hammer-and-anvil nonsense. We were dismayed, because the Atlacatl was supposed to have developed new tactics, but now they were back to the same old shit—you know, insert a blocking force and then carry out a sweep.” The message about El Mozote—the version that the Salvadoran Army had presumably already provided the defense attaché’s office—was, in effect, that the Army had fought hard to dislodge a large company of guerrillas from the town, and though perhaps a few civilians had been killed in the crossfire, soldiers certainly had not carried out a massacre.

Colonel Flores was not particularly happy to see the Americans, and it was
clear that his attitude was shared by the other officers they encountered that day. As McKay—who is now a colonel attached to NATO headquarters in Brussels, and was given permission to speak publicly about the events at El Mozote by the Defense Department—told me, “In general, we had very little cooperation when we went to Morazán.”

They left San Miguel and flew over the Torola toward El Mozote. “You could see there had been a combat sweep through the area,” Greentree said. “You could tell El Mozote had been pretty much destroyed. Roofs were collapsed, buildings were destroyed, and the place was pretty much abandoned.”

As they flew over El Mozote, Greentree went on, he could see signs of battle. “There was an escarpment close to the town, an obvious line of defense, and you could see trench lines there. There were definitely fortifications in the vicinity.” When I pressed him for details, he said that the fortifications might have been closer to Arambala, a mile or so away.

They made several passes at a couple of hundred feet, then circled around for a better look. “As we lost altitude and got within range, we got shot at,” Greentree said. “That was pretty standard stuff out there. It was definitely not a landing situation.”

They headed to Gotera, touched down at the barracks, and received another briefing. “The purpose of the briefing was to impress on us that this was a war zone out there,” said Bleakley, the deputy chief of mission, who had come to Gotera on another helicopter and met Greentree and McKay there. The officers’ point was that “not only were they not out there killing civilians but they were fighting for their lives in that very dangerous war zone to protect the civilians from guerrilla atrocities.”

The Americans said they’d like to have a look, talk to some people in and around the town. “It was extremely tense,” McKay told me. “The Army was clearly not happy with our presence there.”

Accompanied by a squad of soldiers, McKay, Greentree, and Bleakley set off for the refugee camp outside Gotera. “We literally went up and down the streets, saying, ‘Hey, do you know anyone from El Mozote?’” Bleakley said. “The impression you got from people was that this was a conflict zone, that the people still up there were camp followers, you know, involved in the conflict.”

And yet, as McKay acknowledged, the presence of the soldiers made the task of conducting what would, in any case, have been difficult interviews almost impossible. “You had a bunch of very intimidated, scared people, and now the Army presence further intimidated them,” McKay said. “I mean, the Atlacatl had supposedly done something horrible, and now these gringos show up under this pretense of investigating it, but in the presence of these soldiers. It was probably the worst thing you could do. I mean, you didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to know what the Army people were there for.”

Greentree managed to speak to a number of people—including a mayor from one of the towns near El Mozote and several peasants who had lived near the hamlet—out of the soldiers’ hearing. “McKay would work the military and keep them distracted while I went out and around and talked to people,” Greentree said.

The three Americans agreed that the information they gathered in the refugee camp was not explicit. As Greentree put it, “I did not get any direct eyewitness accounts of what had taken place, of the type that Ray Bonner and Alma Guillermoprieto reported. It was more sort of the way people were talking and the way the kids around were still looking as if they’d been through hell, and people saying, ‘Yes, my wife was killed’—that sort of thing.”

Sometime during these interviews, he and McKay became convinced that something had happened in El Mozote. “You could observe and feel this tremendous fear,” McKay said. “I was in Vietnam, and I recognized the ambience. The fear was overriding, and we sensed it.”

“People were freaked out and pretty scared about talking, and stuff,” Greentree said. Nonetheless, the interviews in the refugee camp “convinced me that there probably had been a massacre, that they had lined people up and shot them.”

Bleakley, however (who, as deputy chief of mission, was the senior officer of the three), told me that though it was clear people had been killed, some of them civilians, what we couldn’t answer was the fundamental question—you know, the difference between subduing a town and pulling out the civilians, My Lai style, and massacring them.”

Still, Greentree said, “each person I talked to confirmed the impression that something bad had happened, but nobody was willing to go ahead and give the exact story.” He drew this conclusion “from things they said, their general manner—and their general unwillingness to talk. And that includes the soldiers as well. I mean, you talk to a soldier who thinks he’s taken part in some heroic operation—and a Latin soldier, I mean—you can’t get him to shut up. But these soldiers would say nothing. There was something there.”

Travelling with the squad of soldiers, McKay and Greentree left the refugee camp Bleakley, who had business in the camp, stayed at Gotera, climbed into a military jeep, and headed up the black road. “We went to five villages,” McKay said, including Jocoteique, within a few miles of El Mozote. “We talked to a priest who gave us oblique information that something horrible had happened, and that it was committed by the Army.”

Now the two men, accompanied by the soldiers, set out for El Mozote to see for themselves. “Between five and seven o’clock south of Jocoteique, we were going to turn off the road toward the hamlet and head there cross-country,” McKay said. But the soldiers had begun to grow quiet. “There began to be complaints. They were already sensitive about the civilian with me. Now they were getting more and more sullen. You know, they’d look at the ground, mumble something about being out of radio contact.” Finally, the group reached the place where they’d have to leave the black road for El Mozote. At that point, the soldiers just stopped. “The sergeant said, ‘We’re not going any farther, we’re not going to help you.’ It was made very clear that we would get no more cooperation.”

They had come very close to El Mozote. In less than an hour, they could have seen for themselves the burned buildings, the ruined sacrists, and the bodies. But, with the soldiers’ refusal to go on, the Americans faced the choice of heading on across open country—guerrilla-controlled country—without
protection or turning back. “You want to know what made me decide?” McKay said. “Well, I’d been on that helicopter over there, and we’d received fire, and the month before, the guerrillas had wiped out a whole company up there. What made me decide—me, the big tough marine? I was scared shitless.”

The choice was clear. The Americans, with their soldier escort, turned around and trooped back to Gotera, and from there the helicopter carried them back to the capital. The investigation was over.

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**WASHINGTON’S VERSION**

*Although the Embassy’s investigators had failed to reach El Mozote, their findings became the basis of the State Department’s response.*

At the Embassy, Greentree sat down and began to write, and by the following day, a consultation with Bleakley and review by others in the Embassy, including Ambassador Hinton, a lengthy cable, over the Ambassador’s name, was dispatched to Washington—a cable that provided the basis for what Assistant Secretary of State Enders told Congress two days later. This cable, which was originally obtained in 1983 by a Washington research group called the National Security Archives under a Freedom of Information Act request, is a remarkable document. Its opening paragraph—the all-important “summary” that heads diplomatic cables—reads (with emphasis added) as follows:

> Embassy investigation of reported massacre at El Mozote including visit to the area by assistant (defense attaché) and (Embassy officer) concludes following: Although it is not possible to prove or disprove excesses of violence against the civilian population of El Mozote by Government troops, it is certain that the guerrilla forces who established defensive positions in El Mozote did nothing to remove [civilians] from the path of battle. And yet, as Greentree conceded in our conversation, the descriptions of fighting in El Mozote, and of the “defensive positions” there, came largely, if not exclusively, from the Army briefings. “The information that we had presented to us as concrete was, of course, from the Army side, about the conduct of the combat operation,” he said. The slender version of what happened in El Mozote seems to be a mixture of Army briefings and, at best, inferences by Greentree and Bleakley.

How could the investigators be certain that the guerrillas did nothing to remove civilians “from the path of battle”? The day before the trip to Morazán, another junior reporting officer had sent Bleakley a memorandum passing along the report of a source—the name is effaced in the version released by the government this fall—who, while skeptical of the reported numbers of dead, said that “the military did undertake a sweep (limpieza) of the area, that residents of the area were given time to leave it, that most did and that among the unknown number of victims of the operation were some (unspecified) evangelicals who unwillingly chose to stay behind.” (Bleakley does not recall the document, but he did say that it “conforms with my memory of the time that there were people who were part of this new evangelical movement in El Salvador who would live in guerrilla areas and manage to stay above the conflict.”) It may be that some of the odd language of the summary (“nor is there any evidence that those who remained attempted to leave”) was influenced by this memorandum.

In any event, the assertion that guerrillas “did nothing to remove” civilians is actually contradicted later in the cable, when the authors describe an “aged couple” who said that guerrillas “told them to leave in early December.” According to this, this “aged couple” returned to El Mozote after “the fighting had ended and soldiers were in control.” What did they find? “They claimed they saw dozens of bodies.” This “claim” is simply quoted, without comment, as is the remark, in the next paragraph, by a man who “knew of violent fighting in El Mozote and other nearby cantons” but was “unwilling to discuss compartment of government forces saying ‘This is something one should talk about in another time, in another country.’”

These quotations, together with the flat statements to me from Greentree and McKay that it was clear to them at the time that “something horrible” had happened at El Mozote, that “there probably had been a massacre,” make the cable’s summary puzzling, to say the least. Read now, the circumspect locations that dominate the summary take on the aspect of shields—judicious phrases by which the investigators deflected the burden of explicitly recounting what they strongly suspected had happened. What is curious is how, instead of building on their observations, inferences, and conclusions to present the best version possible of what probably happened, they emphasize the gap between what could be definitively proved to have happened—which, of course, wasn’t much, given the reticence of the people and the constraints on the investigators’ movements—and what the newspapers and the guerrillas were claiming had happened. It is a peculiar way of reasoning, built, as it is, on the assumption that in
the absence of definitive proof nothing at all can really be said to be known. In effect, officials made active use of the obstacles to finding out the truth—and formidable obstacles certainly existed in El Salvador in 1982—to avoid saying clearly and honestly what they knew and what they suspected.

McKay, at least, seems to have been troubled by this at the time. "We could not have said, 'My God, there's been a massacre,'" he told me. "But, truth be known, the ambiguity of the cable that went out—in my own conscience I began to question it. And then when I saw the New York Times piece, and the picture, that really got me to thinking. Bonner and I had gone to Quantico together, went to Vietnam together." McKay finally sent off another cable—"through my own channels," presumably a military or an intelligence circuit—and though I can't say categorically that I actually wrote 'something horrible happened,' what I said was to the effect that something had occurred, because of the fear we had detected from the people there.

McKay, of course, had reviewed the State Department cable before it was sent, but he was not its author; Greenstreet was. Though he was only twenty-eight years old, Greenstreet had already earned the respect of his Foreign Service colleagues and—what was much rarer in El Salvador—was considered a competent, trustworthy official by many in the press corps. Indeed, even a decade later, in his understanding of what had happened in El Salvador he seemed to me the most perceptive of the American officials I interviewed. It was Greenstreet who embodied the United States government in the closest contact it would make to the massacre at El Mozote, and yet it was Greenstreet who provided the reporting that would enable the government to deny that the massacre had happened. It is tempting to conclude that he simply suppressed what was inconvenient, but the truth of what happened in the writing of the cable, like most of the United States' dealings with the issue of "human rights" in El Salvador, is rather more interesting than that.

Greenstreet's recollection, during a series of telephone interviews, of the writing of the cable and of its contents followed a fascinating progression. "As I recall," he told me, "I gave the military account the benefit of the doubt, but I

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probably put in the summary more ambiguity about what I felt." He went on to say, "There were probably a few lines in there that emphasized that, hey, we infer from some of the information we picked up that something happened, and so on." When he was told no such ambiguity could be found in the summary—that, in effect, the only ambiguity in the cable was the conflict, wholly unacknowledged, between its conclusions and some of the observations in the body—he said he "imagined that in the clearing process that got taken out."

The "clearing process," in which the cable made the rounds of officials in the Embassy for review, centered on Kenneth Bleakley, and his recollection of the trip, alone among the recollections of the three, coincides with the conclusions drawn in the cable. Nonetheless, Greenstreet insisted to me that he "did not feel that what went out distorted beyond acceptability" what he had written. In a later comment, he stated emphatically, "At no time during my tour in El Salvador was a report that I had anything to do with ever distorted by the Embassy."

Because those were the standards that Hinton set. Like many in the Embassy, and throughout the Foreign Service, Greenstreet had great respect for Hinton. He describes Hinton as "a totally credible person" and, in writing what he wrote, he clearly felt the pressure to conform to the older man's standards. Yet it is hard not to suspect that Greenstreet's strong belief that the cable contained more "ambiguity" than in fact it did reflects a lingering unease with the final product—a conflict that persists, even after twelve years, between what he wrote and what he felt he should have written.

"I had been in the Foreign Service for only a couple of years at that time," Greenstreet told me, "and we had a very strong Ambassador, and our instructions were to be clear and clean—to not distort. You write it down, and then that becomes the eyes and ears of the United States government. And this was especially important because the journalists reporting in El Salvador were thought to be biased. So if I had said everyone was crying, and everything—well, that wouldn't have had any credibility, either. We reported what we saw, and the main requirement was to distinguish between what you saw and what other people said, and, even more than the standards

"I think I'd like this one."
of journalism, to keep your 'slant' out of what you were reporting."

Had he not been operating under the constraints of politics in Washington, what would he have written differently?

"Well, I would have put in more strongly the impression that abuses against the civilian population probably took place in El Mozote and the surrounding areas during that operation." But he repeated, "It was just an impression. There was no direct corroborating evidence."

Yet this was his strongest impression, and since the limitations caused it to be omitted, didn't they feel rather artificial, at the least?

"That's right," he said. "But that's where, I guess, political judgment came into it. And it was not the judgment that you would think—that, you know, the Ambassador's got to make sure that the information is politically correct. It was that, for the rest of the report to have credibility among people who were far away and whose priorities were—you know, we're talking about people like Tom Enders—whose priorities were definitely not necessarily about getting at exactly what happened: in order for the report to have credibility, all those things have to be kept to a minimum."

At that point, one begins to understand the pressures on the Embassy, and the effect that the great game of politics being played in Washington had on those who were supposedly acting, within El Salvador, as "the eyes and ears of the United States government." Ambassador Hinton was "the guy who sets the standards," Greentree said. "So, of course, since I was a junior officer, my eyes were not on the policy. They were being very affected by the things I was seeing and encountering out there. From the Ambassador's perspective, he had to keep his eye on where we were supposed to be going in the country, and he had to put where the 'truth' was in the context of that. In other words, the possibility that the guerrillas were making a major propaganda ploy over a massacre that might or might not have occurred in El Mozote, and were doing so for the purpose of derailing U.S. policy—well, what the Embassy had to say about that event had to be very, very carefully phrased and controlled, to get as close as possible to what happened and as far away as possible from propaganda on either side, regardless of what might then happen to it once the report got to Washington and was one way or another translated into testimony before Congress."

In reality, then, the admonition to be "clear and clean," to be "professional" and "not distort," served as an excuse to exclude from the cable the very things that had most impressed the men who actually ventured into the war zone. The emphasis on "clean" reporting permitted the blinding and deafening of the government, and served to remove from its field of perception what might have proved to be, in the Washington of early 1982, a very inconvenient fact.

In place of McKay's clear impression that "something horrible happened," and of Greentree's conviction that there probably had been a massacre, that they had lined people up and shot them, the cable supplied to officials in the State Department a number of arguments that they might find useful in impeaching the press accounts of El Mozote—deeply misleading arguments that would form the basis of the government's effort to discredit the reports of the massacre. After citing the numbers of dead that had appeared in the Times and the Washington Post, the cable noted, "It is estimated that no more than 300 people were in the entire canton prior to December 1981"—ignoring the fact that both newspapers had made it quite clear that the massacre took place in El Mozote and in a number of hamlets around it. As for the names of the dead "subsequently reported in the U.S. press," the cable suggested that those "may well have been extracts in whole or part from the civil registries...stolen from Jocoaitique by subversives," though it offered no evidence whatever for this assertion. "I don't recall thinking it was what happened," Greentree said when he was asked about the Jocoaitique claim, "but I thought it was a possibility." And yet he might have learned from Bonner (with whom Greentree was in frequent contact) that the guerrillas had shown the reporter the list several days before they attacked and captured Jocoaitique, so the "possibility" that the names were actually drawn from captured civil registries from Jocoaitique—a charge that an Assistant Secretary of State would soon be repeating to the Congress of the United States—was not a possibility at all.

"El Mozote is in the heart of guerrilla territory," one reads on page 2 of the cable, "and its inhabitants have spent most of the past three years willingly or unwillingly cooperating with insurgents"—an odd location, particularly since the next sentence notes the fact that "Government forces" were last posted in El Mozote in August of 1981, just four months before Operation Rescue. The observation about "willingly or unwillingly cooperating with the insurgents" echoes the attitude of the Salvadoran Army, in which anyone living north of the Torola must be, a priori, a guerrilla follower—and was thus, in the officers' view, fair game. And yet Greentree clearly understood that the reality was more complex.

"Most of these people didn't want anything to do with any of this stuff," he told me. "They just wanted people to leave them alone. ... They were victims of this whole thing. ... If they could get away by giving guerrillas some corn and chickens, and still live on their farms, that's what they would do. At the same time, if the people had to get by giving corn and chickens to the half a dozen Guardia Nacional who were living in their town, then they would do that—whatever it took to enable them to live."

It is an eloquent and concise statement of what the civil war had done to many of the people of Morazán by 1981, but, unfortunately, nothing near such depth of understanding is allowed to come through in the cable.

The cable concludes by noting that the defense attaché's office "is attempting to determine which Army units were present in El Mozote during and after the operation." Of course, if the Embassy wanted to discover what had happened in Morazán this should have been the other path of inquiry: putting the question directly to the American-funded and American-trained Army. And yet six weeks after the events were alleged to have taken place the Embassy reported that it had not managed to discover which units were in El Mozote—this although at least ten American advisers were assigned to the Atlacatl, the unit accused in all the press reports.

As several recently released cables confirm, however, matters were a bit more complicated. On the day Greentree and McKay made their trip to Morazán, Ambassador Hinton had a discussion with Salvadoran Defense Minister García—"on margin of dinner," as he puts it in his cable—about El Mozote. The General (García had been promoted on January 2nd) was about to make a trip to Washington to attend "a Congressional prayer breakfast," and the Ambassador warned him that he should "be ready to respond to Morazán massacre story." General García, Hinton writes, "was his
The Trump administration has been widely criticized for its handling of the coronavirus pandemic, with many accusing it of being slow to respond and lacking in preparedness. This has led to questions about the administration's ability to manage public health crises.

The President, however, has denied any wrongdoing and has called the administration's response a success. "We have done a great job," he said in a recent press conference. "I think we have a very successful program going on."

Despite this, many experts and public health officials have expressed concern about the administration's approach, citing a lack of clear guidance and a disjointed response to the crisis. Some have raised concerns about the administration's handling of the pandemic's spread, particularly in densely populated areas.

The administration has also faced criticism for its handling of the economic impact of the pandemic, with many arguing that the administration has not done enough to support those most affected by the crisis. The President has defended his economic policies, saying that the economy is "strong" and that it will recover quickly.

However, many economists and business leaders have expressed concern about the administration's approach, citing a lack of leadership and a lack of continuity in policymaking.

In the face of these challenges, the administration has continued to push for economic reopening, despite concerns about the potential for a second wave of infections. The President has argued that the economy must move forward, even if it means taking risks.

This approach has led to mixed results, with some states seeing a significant increase in cases and hospitalizations in recent weeks. The administration has faced pressure from states and local governments to rein in the spread of the virus, with many calling for increased testing and contact tracing.

Despite these challenges, the President has remained confident in his ability to lead the nation through the crisis. "We will come out of this," he said in a recent interview. "We will be back to normal very quickly."

However, many experts and public health officials have expressed doubt about the administration's ability to contain the virus and bring the country back to normal. The crisis has highlighted the need for strong leadership and effective policy making, and many are calling for a more coordinated and effective approach to managing the pandemic.
including the identity, among others, of Major Cáceres. The General replies that Cáceres is "a straightforward, honorable soldier who would never have killed women and children as described in the story." After some discussion, General García acknowledges that "the Atlacatl Battalion had been in El Mozote during the December sweep," but then he reiterated that the story was a pack of lies." García does promise the Ambassador that he will look into the matter further. "He asked me to leave with the stories and I did so adding as a sweetener the Washington Post editorial of January 29 supporting our common policies."

One gets a vivid sense from these cables of the frustrating position the Americans had placed themselves in in their dealings with the Salvadoran military. The Salvadorans behave with an arrogance that bespeaks their awareness of their own power. Washington was behind them and they knew it: Why should they comply with these local officials, except in those cases where they absolutely had to?

In the case of El Mozote, it was already clear that they didn't have to. Greentree remembers thinking as he sat in the helicopter on the way back from the capital from Morazán, "If we're really going to get to the bottom of this, there's going to have to be a decision to put a tremendous amount of energy into it, to carry out a more formal investigation, like the ones conducted for the Americans—the four churchwomen. I remember feeling frustrated and dissatisfied with what we came back with. But, if we'd wanted to go any further with it, it would have taken a decision to expend a tremendous amount of effort." No such decision was ever made.

Two days after Greentree's cable arrived at the State Department, Assistant Secretary Thomas O. Enders went up to Capitol Hill. Sitting before the House Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, he set out to defend the President's certification that the Salvadoran government was making a "concerted and significant effort to comply with internationally recognized human rights."

Secretary Enders told Congress that he would make "a coherent attempt to answer the question that you have raised... are we getting some results." "Results" he would interpret to mean im-

out that is very hard to establish. The responsibility for the overwhelming number of deaths is never legally determined nor usually accounted for by clear or coherent evidence. Seventy percent of the political murders known to our Embassy were committed by unknown assailants. As in the cable, the fact that the killers' identities could not be definitively known, though in most cases few doubted who the killers were, was used as a shield—a excuse to ignore what was known. In the absence of conclusive, undeniable proof, the government would feel free to assert that all was darkness.

"We sent two Embassy officers down to investigate the reports... of the massacre in Mozote," the Secretary went on. "It is clear from the report that they gave that there has been a confrontation between the guerrillas occupying Mozote and attacking government forces last December. There is no evidence to confirm that government forces systematically massacred civilians in the operations zone, or that the number of civilians remotely approached the seven hundred and thirty-three or nine hundred and twenty-six victims cited in the press." Echoing the strategy suggested in

"How about a little more coffee?"
Greentree’s cable, Enders went on, “I note they asked how many people there were in that canton and were told probably not more than three hundred in December, and there are many survivors including refugees, now. So we have to be very careful about trying to adduce evidence to the certification. We try, our Embassy tries, to investigate every report we receive.”

Six days later, Elliott Abrams, the Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, remarked to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the El Mozote case “is a very interesting one in a sense, because we found, for example, that the numbers, first of all, were not credible, because as Secretary Enders notes, our information was that there were only three hundred people in the canton.”

The argument about numbers is, of course, deeply misleading—no one who read the Times and the Post articles could have missed the fact that the killing had taken place in several hamlets; two of the three survivorsGuillermoprieto quoted, for example, were from La Joya, not El Mozote. But the argument exemplifies a pattern. Claiming to have investigated “the facts” and to have found “no evidence” of a massacre, American officials then seized on aspects of the charges that, they said, reveal them to be propaganda. “We find...that it is an event that happened in mid-December but it is then publicized when the certification comes forward to the committee,” Abrams told the Senate. “So, it appears to be an incident which is at least being significantly misused, at the very best, by the guerrillas.” In an interview more than a decade later, Abrams made the same argument. He pointed out that the massacre had “supposedly” taken place in December, and asked, “If it had really been a massacre and not a firefight, why didn’t we hear right off from the F.M.L.N.? I mean, we didn’t start hearing about it until a month later.”

As has been noted, the guerrillas first “publicized” the massacre about two weeks after the event—as soon as they had got Radio Venceremos back on the air. All the same, it is indisputable that the volume of reporting about El Mozote from Venceremos, from human-rights groups, and from the international press grew steadily throughout January, and reached a crescendo the day before Reagan’s certification, with the front-page stories in the Post and the Times. Certainly a significant part of this publicity—it is impossible to say how much—was owing, directly and indirectly, to the efforts of those, beginning with the guerrillas and their international propaganda apparatus, who had a strong interest in derailing the Administration’s policy in El Salvador. But Administration officials focused obsessively on this unsurprising reality, as if the very fact that the El Mozote story was being used as propaganda—that it was, as Abrams put it, “significantly misused...by the guerrillas”—in itself constituted proof that the massacre hadn’t taken place.

To many in the Administration, the importance of the massacre was that it had such propaganda value, and that the propaganda, coming at a crucial time, posed a threat to American aid. Preserving the Salvadoran government and helping it win the war were paramount; “improving human rights” naturally took a back seat since, as the Administration liked to put it, by far the worst disaster that could befall human rights in El Salvador was a Communist victory. This attitude was no mystery to the Salvadoran leaders; despite the periodic brouhahas over certain atrocities, they could see the bottom line quite clearly, which was, as Abrams phrased it, that “whatever you think of us from a human-rights point of view, what you think of us from a security point of view is determinative.”

To say the least, this attitude did not encourage anyone in the State Department to make any additional effort to find out what had happened at El Mozote. As far as the Department officials were concerned, Greentree’s cable was the end of the matter. The cable had come from Hinton’s Embassy, and Hinton had a great deal of prestige in the Department. By now, however, Hinton himself had taken a rather different view. “I would be grateful if Department would use extreme care in describing my views on alleged massacre,” he cabled on February 1st. Apparently, Washington had sent out cables saying that the Ambassador, in his reply to the National Council of Churches, had denied the massacre had taken place. “My letter did not deny incident: it reported that at that time I had no confirmation and...had no reason to believe Ven-ceremos reports. I still don’t believe Venceremos version but additional evidence strongly suggests that something happened that should not have happened and that it is quite possible Salvadoran military did commit excesses.”

Not only McKay and Greentree but now Hinton himself had come to the conclusion that “something happened” at El Mozote—and Hinton had now told the State Department so. To this, he added a frank appraisal of the Salvadoran officers’ credibility. “I find García’s assertion...we have absolutely no information on military actions in El Mozote...to be stonewalling without credibility. I have tried to warn him re need to face up to problem, but my impression is he thinks categoric denial is way to handle question. Department officers may wish to discuss matter with him...before U.S. press gets to him.”

As it happened, however, “Department officers” seem to have agreed with General García. They had the Greentree cable, and they would make use of it. After all, the question would come down to—as Abrams put it to me—“Do you believe the Embassy, an agency of the United States government, or Americas Watch?” Americas Watch and other human-rights organizations, Abrams said, “did not have a great deal of credibility with us,” for, in his view, they had ranged themselves on the side of those who argued, in effect, for an F.M.L.N. victory, and thus they served as willing tools of the hypocrites in Congress who now forced Administration officials to undergo a meaningless certification exercise. “Certification was this political game they were playing,” Howard Lane, the Embassy press officer, told me. “I mean, everybody knew, Congress knew, what they—the Salvadoran government—were doing down there. By then, they had to know, unless they refused to see it. So they beat their breasts, and tore their hair, and yelled about human rights, and made us jump through this hoop called certification. If any Ambassador wanted to keep his job, he had to jump, which meant essentially saying the half-empty glass was really half full. It was a game. I mean, ‘improvement’—what’s improvement, anyway? You kill eight hundred and it goes down to two hundred, that’s improvement. The whole thing was an exercise in the absurd.”

Even the good soldier, Enders on
which not only ranged from conservative to unabashedly right-wing but weighted their reporting toward the cities. In 1981, fewer people were being killed in the cities, because fewer activists were there to be killed; most of those who had not been liquidated in late 1979 or 1980 had moved to the mountains. And the killings in the mountains, in the isolated hamlets and villages, rarely reached the pages of newspapers in the capital.

"Let me be clear this is not a complete report," Enders told Congress. "Nobody has a complete report. . . . But, nonetheless, it is a coherent attempt to answer the question that you have raised . . . are we getting some results. This is the indication that I submit to you that we are."

To this statement a number of congressmen responded with outraged eloquence. Gerry Studds, Democrat of Massachusetts, told Enders, "If there is anything left of the English language in this city . . . it is gone now, because the President has just certified that up is down and in is out and black is white. I anticipate him telling us that war is peace at any moment." It was an irresistible quote, and it made for great television. But it didn’t make any difference. Enders had supplied a "coherent attempt to answer the question" that Congress had posed, and though Democratic congressmen would not spare their voices, or their sarcasm, in noting "the Orwellian tones of this certification," as Steven Solarz, Democrat of New York, put it—though congressmen attacked the numbers and the methodology, and the hearings became contentious and angry—it was clear that, come what may, there would not be the votes to cut off aid to El Salvador, for that, as everybody knew, would mean "losing" the country to the Communists. At root, nearly everyone tacitly agreed (the Democrats—whose purported "loss" of China three decades before was still a painful Party memory—no less than the Republican Administration and its allies) that that eventuality was too intolerable even to contemplate, and that in the end the Salvadoran government, by whatever means, had to win the war, or the country’s security would be acceptably threatened. And so, because of this underlying agreement, the entire debate, loud and angry as it appeared at first glance, was not a debate. It was an exercise for the cameras.

As for El Mozote, since the Salvadoran newspapers said nothing about it, those who had died there merited no place in the numbers Secretary Enders brought to Congress. Had the massacre somehow been "proved" to the State Department’s satisfaction—had it been, somehow, impossible for the Administration to deny—El Mozote would have had an ugly effect on the Administration’s numbers: political murders would have shown an increase in December from six hundred and sixty-five to well over a thousand, rather than the sharp decline he claimed. Would this have led Congress to reject the certification and cut off aid? Reading the record now, feeling once again the fear in Washington of an F.M.L.N. victory and of the blame such a victory might impose on American politicians, the question seems, sadly, difficult to answer. Aid might have been reduced, true, but, at most, Congress might have managed to cut off aid temporarily, only to restore it again in a panic—as Carter had done—at the first new guerrilla onslaught.

But this is speculation. In the event, the dead of El Mozote did not really come into the discussion at all.

On February 10th, the Wall Street Journal published a lengthy editorial headed "The Media’s War," in which it noted that the public’s "perceptions are badly confused" on the war in El Salvador, and attributed much of that confusion to "the way the struggle is being covered by the U.S. press." Most notable were several paragraphs that took up the question of El Mozote:

Take the recent controversy over charges of a "massacre" by an elite battalion of the El Salvadoran army. On January 27, Raymond Bonner of the New York Times and Alma Guillermoprieto of the Washington Post simultaneously reported on a visit to rebel territory, repeating interviews in which they were told that hundreds of civilians were killed in the village of Mozote in December. Thomas O. Enders, assistant secretary of state for Inter-American affairs, later cast doubt on the reports. There had been a military operation but no systematic killing of civilians, he said, and anyway the population of the village was only 300 before the attack in which 926 people supposedly died. When a correspondent is offered a chance to tour rebel territory, he certainly ought to accept, and to report what he sees and
hers. But there is such a thing as being overly credulous. Mr. Bonner reported "it is clear" the massacre happened, while Miss Guillermprieto took pains to say that reporters had been "taken to tour" the site by guerrillas with the purpose of showing their control and providing evidence of the massacre. In other words, whatever the mixture of truth or fabrication, this was a propaganda exercise.

Realistically, neither the press nor the State Department has the power to establish conclusively what happened at Mozote in December. We're sure the sophisticated editors of the Times recognize as much. Yet as an institution, their paper has closed ranks behind a reporter out on a limb, waging a little campaign to bolster his position by impugning his critics. A "news analysis" charged the government of sowing confusion by questioning press reports "without presenting detailed evidence to support its position." The analysis posed the question of "how American diplomats gather information abroad," but not the same question about American reporters.

Oddly missing from these paragraphs, and from the rest of that very long editorial, was any acknowledgment that the two reporters had actually seen corpses—in Guillermprieto's case, at least, dozens of corpses—and that Meiselas had taken photographs of those corpses. Instead, the editorial said that the two journalists "repeat interviews in which they were told that hundreds of civilians were killed in the village of Mozote," and then said immediately afterward that Enders "later cast doubt on the reports"—as if Enders, or his representatives, had actually made it to the village, as if the kind of evidence he was purveying were no different from what were, after all, two eyewitness accounts, if not of the events themselves, then of their aftermath. The reporting done by the journalists and by the Embassy officials is repeatedly yoked together, as if the two parties had visited the same sites, seen the same evidence, talked to the same people, and merely drawn different conclusions. Neither party, the editorial declared, "has the power to establish conclusively what happened at Mozote"—the implication being, as the Administration itself had argued repeatedly in its defense of its Salvadoran allies, that, since there is no "conclusive" account, nothing can be truly known. The idea that much of a journalist's business consists of a studied sifting of what is said and what is observed, of a careful wrestling with gradations of evidence, and a continual judgment of the credibility of witnesses—this notion is nowhere present in the sixteen paragraphs of the journal's editorial.

Seven days after the Journal's attack on the Times' "overly credulous" reporter, the State Department received a cable over the name of the Ambassador to Honduras, John Negroponte, reporting on a visit by an Embassy official and a House Foreign Affairs Committee staff member to the refugee camp at Colomocagua, to which many of the refugees from Morazán had fled two months before. According to the cable, the refugees described to the American diplomat "a military sweep in Morazán December 7 to 17 which they claim resulted in large numbers of civilian casualties and physical destruction, leading to their exodus." The cable went on to say that "names of villages cited coincide with New York Times article of January 28 same subject." The reporting officer added that the refugees' "decision to flee at this time when in the past they had remained during sweeps... lends credibility to reportedly greater magnitude and intensity of... military operations in Northern Morazán." This information was not made public.

Six months after the Journal's attack on him, Raymond Bonner was gone from Central America. Since the El Mozote story and the controversy surrounding it, Bonner had been under great pressure, enduring a steady fusillade of criticism from the Embassy and the State Department, as well as from various right-wing American publications for whom Bonner had come to symbolize the supposed "leftward tilt" of reporting in Central America. In August, 1982, Bonner received a telephone call in his Managua hotel room informing him that he should report to the Metro desk in New York.

The Times' decision to remove a correspondent who had been the focus of an aggressive campaign of Administration criticism no doubt had a significant effect on reporting from El Salvador. The New York Times editors appeared to have "caved" to government pressure, and the Administration seemed to have succeeded in its campaign to have a trouble-some reporter—the most dogged and influential in El Salvador—pulled off the beat.

The public position of A. M. Rosenthal, then the executive editor of the Times, has always been, as he told me by telephone, that "at no time did anybody in the United States government suggest to me, directly or indirectly, that I remove Mr. Bonner," and, further, that "anyone who would approach the New York Times and suggest to me that I remove or punish a correspondent would have to be an idiot. To imply that a man who devoted himself to journalism would remove a reporter because of the U.S. government or the C.I.A., or whatever, is ridiculous, naive, cruel, and slanderous."

According to Rosenthal, Bonner was removed because he had never been fully trained in the Times' particular methods. Bonner, he said, "didn't know the techniques of weaving a story together... I brought him back because it seemed terribly unfair to leave him there without training." Bonner had been trained as a lawyer, had been an assistant district attorney and a Nader's Raider, and had joined the Times as a stringer in Central America. Seymour Topping, then the managing editor, told me that "because we were considerably pressed at the time in getting people into the field in Salvador, we short-circuited what would be our normal process of training people on Metro to learn the style and methods of the Times." Bonner, Topping went on, "had done a first-class job of investigative journalism, and there was never any question that he had come up with the facts—that his stories were true. But, if he had been more experienced, the way he had written his stories—qualified them, etc.—would have left him much less open to criticism."

But "training" was not the only issue—for that matter, as Bonner pointed out to me, he had spent a good part of 1981 on the Metro desk—and, at least in Rosenthal's case, the question of Bonner's "journalistic technique" seems to have been inextricably bound up with what the executive editor came to perceive as the reporter's left-wing sympathies. "If anybody ever asked me to withdraw him, he'd still be there," Rosenthal told me, and certainly the idea that the government simply pressured the Times into withdrawing Bonner is wrong. Rosenthal suggests that others have promoted this version of the story because "I was an agent of change in the Times, and a lot of people didn't like my politics"; but conversations with a number of Times reporters and editors, former and current, persuaded me that the campaign
against Bonner was more effective than it might have been because of Rosenthal’s own politics. Several people told me that Rosenthal had made no secret that he was unhappy with Bonner, because the reporter, as one characterized the editor’s view, “was too willing to accept the Communist side of the story. He was very vocal that Bonner was sympathetic to the Communist side in Central America.” The criticism from the right—led by the Wall Street Journal editorial on El Mozote—“resonated with Abe, because it reinforced his own suspicions about Bonner. There seemed to be a growing audience out there that agreed with Abe.” Several current and former Times employees (none of whom would speak for attribution) pointed to a scene in a Georgetown restaurant a few weeks after the El Mozote story ran—it was the evening of the annual Gridiron dinner—in which Rosenthal criticized Bonner and angrily described the sufferings that Communist regimes inflict on their people.

(Bonner finally left the Times in 1984; in 1987, he began writing for The New Yorker—as did, two years later, Alma Guillermoprieto. He left the magazine in 1992; he is now writing special assignments for the Times.)

El Mozote represented the climax of the era of the great massacres. It was not the last of them—most notably, in August of 1982 the Atlacatl, in an operation similar to that in El Mozote, killed some two hundred people at El Calabozo, in the Department of San Vicente—but after El Mozote the Army relied less and less on search-and-destroy operations that entailed large-scale killing of civilians. It may be that the guerrillas’ use of El Mozote for propaganda and the controversy that followed in the United States led senior officers to begin to realize the potential cost of such slaughter. It may be that the highly visible denunciations in Congress finally lent the Embassy’s habitual sellings a bit more credibility. (Even someone as firmly contemptuous of congressional pressure as Elliott Abrams acknowledges that “the good-cop, bad-cop routine with Congress was very effective” and that “there was some positive impact there in reducing the killing.”) It may be that the officers realized that lesser massacres—of forty people or fewer, say—could accomplish as much without attracting so much attention.

More important, the key Salvadoran officers no doubt realized that El Mozote had accomplished its purpose. It was not only that in much of northern Morazán the civilians had fled beyond the border—that in several key areas the water had been taken from the fish. It was what El Mozote had meant—what it had said—to those who remained. For El Mozote was, above all, a statement. By doing what it did in El Mozote, the Army had proclaimed loudly and unmistakably to the people of Morazán, and to the peasants in surrounding areas as well, a simple message: Whatever the circumstances, the guerrillas can’t protect you, and we, the officers and the soldiers, are willing to do absolutely anything to avoid losing this war—we are willing to do whatever it takes.

MONTERROSA’S STAR

After El Mozote, the Colonel embraced a new, grass-roots style of combat that the guerrillas came to regard as his most dangerous weapon.

By late 1982, the tide had begun to turn in Morazán, which is to say not that the Army had begun to win but that it had become less than certain that it would lose. The preceding March, the elections for the Constituent Assembly, on which the Reagan Administration had set much store, had been a huge political success for Administration policy, with a much higher turnout than had been expected. By exerting enormous pressure, the Administration had succeeded in blocking Roberto d’Aubuisson, the best known of the ultra-rightists, from becoming provisional President. Instead, the officers and party leaders and the Americans had agreed upon Alvaro Magaña Borja, a wealthy aristocrat and international banker with many old friends in the officer corps, as a compromise.

The successful elections and the consequent emergence of the highly presentable, English-speaking Magaña helped the Administration placate Congress. (By the July certification report, the Administration had altered its language from “no evidence to confirm” to “no evidence to support” allegations of “large-scale massacres allegedly committed by government forces”—in direct contradiction of what Hinton, and even Greentree, had reported.) Congress more than doubled military aid, from thirty-five million dollars to eighty-two million, and increased economic aid to more than twice that. Not only were the Americans sending new, top-of-the-line equipment and plenty of ammunition, but they were expanding the Army—training hundreds of officers and soldiers in the States. Most important, Colonel Jaime Flores, apparently because of rather too blatant irregularities in his payroll in San Miguel, incurred the wrath of Magaña, and was consequently “promoted” from command of the all-important Third Brigade to command of the less important First Brigade, and, finally, to that of San Salvador’s Fire Department. To replace Flores in San Miguel, Magaña drew on the obvious—the inevitable—choice: Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa.

Monterrosa thus became the military commander of the entire eastern zone of El Salvador, and entered upon the period of his greatest renown. Very often, the
THE TIDE TURNS IN MORAZÁN

Army publicity people or the American press people steered reporters straight to the dynamic colonel. "He was a phenomenon," Lucia Annunziata, who travelled frequently with Monterrosa as a correspondent for La República, told me. "The Americans were always telling us that here he was, here was the new breed of officer they were always promising. He had embraced completely the anti-Communist ideology of the Americans. By then, he talked not like some kind of butcher but like an American. He was completely full of this idea of conquering hearts and minds."

In 1978, Monterrosa had attended the Political Warfare Cadres Academy, in Peitou, Taiwan, and had been trained there in what he described to an interviewer as "war of the masses" and "Communism of this side." He'd returned to El Salvador "very enthusiastic" about the skills he had learned—"how to project ourselves to the civilian population and win them over"—but found to his dismay that senior officers weren't very interested. Now he began to apply what he'd learned.

"He was always tactically very good," Licho, the rebel commander, told me. "Then he began using much more intelligent methods. You know, whenever he would take a village he would come in personally and do political work himself." His soldiers, usually helicopter-borne, would storm a town, flushing out the armed guerrillas, and then Monterrosa would arrive and gather the people together. "He would make a speech there in the plaza," Annunziata said. "He would ask, 'Who is sick? Who needs help?' Then he would say, 'Do you know these people?'—that is, the guerrillas. And, of course, no one would answer. And he would say, in this soft voice, 'Are you sure? Are you sure you don't have a cousin with them?'

By this time, people all over the countryside recognized the famous figure of Monterrosa. He was short—stooped, even—with a slight paunch. "He was completely nonmartial," Annunziata said. "He always wore this tattered, sweat-stained camouflage-green bandanna on his head, and he had a real Indian face—big nose, receding chin. With that bandanna, he looked like an old aunt. He was a bit of a fop, a bit dandified. He had this young boy always with him, a beautiful young boy of ten or twelve, who took care of his things. He was always touching his soldiers very physical, you know. At night, he would get in his red hammock and put on blue gloves and cover his face with a blue towel. He was a real dandy.

"It was late in the afternoon, and we were outside the town of Carolina, on a hill above it. Monterrosa was sitting on a low stone wall, with his feet dangling over the side. He got on the radiophone and he called, 'Charlie, Charlie'—that was his code name—to Orange,' and he gave the coördinates, and the planes came and bombed and all the while he was directing the planes with the radio. We looked down, and we could see another Army unit entering the town and then the guerrillas leaving from the other side.

"The next morning, the people came out of the town in a long column. You could see them winding their way up the hill in a long line, moving up to where Monterrosa was sitting on the same wall,
leaning back, looking halfway between a king and a hero. And, one by one, the peasants passed in front of him, and each of them had an offering. One of them would give him an egg, another some tortillas, another would push forward a young boy to sign up. And Monterrosa would motion to an aide, as he reclined there like a Roman emperor. I remember a father carrying a little boy who had his head covered with a white handkerchief, and then when he came in front of Monterrosa the father unveiled the kid's head and you could see he had this big growth on his face. And Monterrosa nodded to an aide. The aide grabbed the radio and called in the helicopter to take the kid to the hospital in the city.

By 1983, Monterrosa's new tactics had begun to show some success. "He changed the way he related to the local population, and he was less arrogant in his military stance toward us," Villalobos, the E.R.P. comandante, told me. "There was this first stage, I think, in which he executed the massacres not only because it formed part of his military training and it was tactically approved by the High Command but also because he didn't think it would become a political problem. Then, later, he realized that this sort of tactic didn't work. It did not produce a quick military victory."

Anunziata agreed. "He was not bloodthirsty, but he was so neurotically driven—he wanted at all costs to win the war," she said. "The point was to create a turning point, a watershed, to turn the tide, and to do it by scaring the hell out of the enemy. It was a deliberate demonstration of cruelty to show them that the guerrillas couldn't protect them. And he understood that you do this as cruelly, as brutally as possible; you rape, impale, whatever, to show them the cost."

To most of the reporters who covered him now—few of whom had been in the country in 1981—El Mozote was just a distant rumor, a dark echo from the past. "He was the press-corps officer, you know, very personable," Jon Lee Anderson, who was reporting for Time magazine, said, "but there was always this buzz that he was responsible for El Mozote, and, of course, he always denied it." By this time, Monterrosa had a mistress in the press corps—a beautiful young Salvadoran woman who worked for an American television network. Anunziata recalls, "He would helicopter in to the Camino Real—the San Salvador hotel favored by the international press—to visit her, and he would burst through the door of the press offices in his combat fatigue and come over and look over your shoulder at what you were writing and say, 'Have you written about me today?'" Monterrosa's girlfriend let her colleagues know—speaking in all confidence, of course—that there had been "a problem" with the El Mozote operation, and although, for understandable reasons, she wasn't free to go into details, all one had to know was that on that particular day the Colonel had unfortunately "lost radio contact" with his men—with regrettable consequences.

The guerrillas did not find this story very convincing. "He was well known to all the guerrillas as the man who had ordered the massacre," Liacho said. "Everybody wanted to kill him in combat."

Now, however, their adversary had begun doing what they themselves knew was the most effective thing to do in order to win the war: "political work" in the countryside. "He started learning; he began to play football with the people, help their families. We realized that for someone as militarily talented as he was to start to do real political work could be very dangerous. I think it was at the beginning of 1983 that we started making plans to kill him."

Villalobos and Monterrosa were obsessed with each other's psychology," Anunziata said. "For Monterrosa, it was like looking in a mirror. He had this obsession with the guerrillas—with knowing them, understanding them. He had studied all the different groups, and claimed he could always tell which one had staged an operation. He felt he was the alter ego of the guerrillas. Every night, out in the field, he would listen to the radio, first to the BBC and then to Radio Venceremos, listening to what they said he'd done that day. Every night, you could hear, coming from his hammock, the 'Internationale' playing over Radio Venceremos."

As it happened, Monterrosa's fascination with Radio Venceremos—his capture of the transmitter, after all, had been the high point of Operation Rescue—had not escaped the notice of his alter ego. "A basic principle of warfare is to study the psychology of the enemy commanders," Villalobos said. "Monterrosa was obsessed with war trophies. He got personally involved in combat situations when his men captured something—to such an extent that at times he lost the ability to coordinate troop movements. Once, he arrived personally to take charge of video records that they had captured from us. Another time, it was a scale model that we had used to plan an attack. Each time, he came himself. And he was desperate to stop Radio Venceremos. I mean, any cassette or tape recorder he found was turned into a great victory."

Increasingly, in late 1983 and on into 1984, Monterrosa had victories to celebrate. His "beans and bullets" campaign was making progress in Morazán. The area under F.M.L.N. control was gradually shrinking, and so, even more critically, was the guerrillas' manpower base. By the summer of 1984, reports had begun circulating that the guerrillas were reduced to conscripting civilians into their ranks.

That September, the Americans gave the Army ten new Huey helicopters. "When I saw that news about the helicopters, I told a friend, 'Monterrosa will be coming after us,'" Villalobos said. "'He will use those helicopters to attack the command post.' The delivery of the helicopters, not coincidentally, came at the time of a major diplomatic initiative by the Salvadoran government. On October 15th, President José Napoleon Duarte—he had won an election earlier that year, and replaced Magaña—joined Minister of Defense Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova and other government representatives in a meeting with guerrilla leaders (among them Guillermo Ungo, who had been Duarte's Vice-Presidential running mate in the stolen elections of 1972), in La Palma, about eighty miles west of Morazán.

Three days after the meeting, Monterrosa launched a major offensive in Morazán, a six-thousand-man sweep called Torola IV. "The war goes on," he told James LeMoyne, of the New York Times, as they stood at the base at Osicala, watching the men of the Atlacatl board the new Huey helicopters and lift off into the northern sky. "There are times when you have to make war to gain peace."

Villalobos would be coordinating the response to Torola IV, a campaign that, in its broad outline, appeared much like Operation Rescue, three years before: soldiers from regular Army units were
storming north across the Torola, and
the helicopter-borne men of the Atlacatl
were moving down from Perquin and
other mountain towns. This time, how-
ever, the guerrillas’ response would be
somewhat different.

Villalobos and his staff were hard at
work planning an ambush for the town
of Joateca, a few miles east of El Mozote.
It was a well-planned ambush—they had
devoted many hours to its preparation—
but an unusual one: the guerrillas were
planning to have the Army ambush them
and thus “capture” a prize that they very
much wanted Monterrosa to claim.

On October 22nd, Monterrosa heli-
coptered in to Joateca. With him was,
among others, Jon Lee Anderson, of
Time. “It was real air-mobile ops,” An-
derson told me in an interview. “Flying
around from one place to another, insert-
ing troops, choppering around, moving
several times a day.” In Joateca, he said,
an advance platoon had flushed out the
guerrillas the day before. Now the people
were gathered there, waiting for Mon-
terrosa. “It was this turfy plaza in this
ramshackle old hamlet—you know, cob-
blestones, shaded front porches—and he
gathered the townspeople around and
gave them this hearts-and-minds sort of
speech. He was sitting at a table with a
microphone in his hand, and he had a
woman social worker and a civilian psy-
chologist there beside him.”

Anderson quotes Monterrosa as tell-
ing the peasants, “We are your true
brothers. We’re not the caretakers of
the rich. Do you see any rich among us? We
give our blood to the soil, but it’s up to
you to make it fertile.”

Around that time, not far from the
plaza where Monterrosa was speaking,
his men had pounced on a group of hap-
less guerrillas. “We sent a column of our
fighters to fall into an ambush,” Villa-
lobos said, “and then they were supposed
to leave the transmitter, as if, you know,
they’d had to abandon it”—as they’d had
to do three years before. “But it didn’t
work out that way. We weren’t able to
get the transmitter up to where the com-
bat took place. We were upset—we
thought we had blown the operation. I
mean, they should have been suspicious.”

The rebels had left the transmitter
near a graveyard on the outskirts of
Joateca. Not far away, Villalobos and his
men were waiting tensey, listening in-
tently to their radios. Suddenly, they
heard soldiers begin to talk excitedly to
one another. “As soon as they found the
transmitter, there was a big celebration,”
Villalobos said. “We could hear them
talking about all the prizes they would
get, and so on.” The soldiers began to
congratulate one another, speculating on
how happy the Colonel would be when
his men brought him this priceless trea-
sure. There was not a hint of suspicion.
“Just as vanity blinded Monterrosa, it
blinded his soldiers as well,” Villalobos
said. “We just had to wait for his per-
sonal psychology to play itself out.”

Late in the afternoon, Jon Lee Ande-
son sat down to interview the Colonel.
“He disappeared for a while, and then he
came back very excited,” Anderson said.
“He sat down next to me on the stoop
of this old peasant house, and he con-
fided to me that he thought he’d found
the transmitter. It was in this graveyard,
in a cemetery at the edge of this little
hamlet. This was somewhat far from
where things were happening, it’s true,
but the town had definitely been theirs—
I mean, there were graffiti everywhere.”

Anderson seized that moment to ask
Monterrosa about the rumors that still
clug to him about what had happened
at El Mozote. “It was late, and we were
sitting there, just the two of us, and I
said, ‘Colonel, qué pasó en El Mozote?’
And there was this long pause, and he
looked away, and finally he said, ‘No es
como dicen’—‘It’s not like they say.’

Monterrosa would say no more, but
Anderson took his answer as a tacit con-
firmation that Monterrosa had been in-
volved in the massacre. Shortly before,
James LeMoyne had asked Monterrosa
the same question, and, according to Le-
Moyne, the Colonel, in the aftermath of
a long and exhausting day of combat,
had answered more bluntly. “He shrugged
and said, ‘Yeah, we did it. We carried out
a limpieza there. We killed everyone,’”
LeMoyne told me. “He said, ‘In those
days, I thought that was what we had to
do to win the war. And I was wrong.’”

Late that evening, Anderson and his
photographer left, somewhat regretfully,
for the capital. They needed to file their
stories, but they intended to rejoin
Monterrosa in his chopper the follow-
ing day. The next day, three senior offi-
cers and a three-man Army television
team arrived in Joateca. Along with a local
priest and sacristan, they planned to ac-
company the victorious Colonel as he
carried his prize back to the capital. It
was to be a triumphal entrance. The cap-
ture of the transmitter was an enormous
propaganda victory, and Monterrosa
wanted to film it, record it, publicize it—
to milk it for all it was worth.

The men climbed aboard the helicop-
ter and took their seats, and as the ro-
tors roared overhead soldiers began loading the equipment aboard. Sitting in the place of honor beside Monterroza, as it happened, was Todd Green tree, of the United States Embassy. “We were sitting together,” Green tree said. “He was buckling in, and people were stowing aboard all these duffelbags that belonged to different soldiers—you know, ‘Take this back to my wife in San Salvador.’ The transmitter must have been in one of those. Then a soldier came over to Monterroza to tell him he had a radio call, and he got off to take it.”

Green tree was in a great hurry to get back to the capital—he has long since forgotten why. “I saw that another helicopter was getting ready to take off, and I was in such a hurry to get back that I got off and climbed aboard.”

On a hill northwest of the town, the guerrillas of the E.R.P. watched excitedly as the Huey slowly rose above the tree line. They waited until it had reached its apogee, pointed a remote-control device in a direct line of sight, and pressed the button. Nothing happened. “We didn’t know what had gone wrong,” Villalobos said. “We thought we had a malfunction. Then we heard his press conference”—Monterroza was apparently being interviewed by radio, announcing his destruction of Radio Venceremos—and we realized that it was the wrong helicopter.”

They sat tensely on the hill deep into the afternoon, until at last, after what must have seemed an interminable wait, a second helicopter climbed above the treetops and loosed into space. The big aircraft rose high over Joatoca, turned, and began to head west, toward the Sapo River—toward the tiny hamlet of El Mozote. Poised high in the blue sky, it caught the sun. Far below, a man from Perquin gazed upward, squinted, and then saw the machine of war—he had seen such machines so many times over Morazán—suddenly blossom into a great orange-and-black fireball; and then he was deafened by the explosion.

The man, who had been forced to guide Monterroza’s men on their limpieza three years before, said, “I remember thinking, If only he had gone a few minutes more, his blood would have been mixed with the soil of El Mozote.”

MONTERRROZA was five years dead before the exiles returned to Morazán. Crowded into the trucks and buses that came over the mountains from the Honduran refugee camps, they flooded back into the deserted villages and hamlets of the red zone. The Salvadoran government could do nothing to stop them, for it was November, 1989, and across the country the guerrillas had unleashed a general offensive that, in the political shock it provoked, would turn out to be the Salvadoran equivalent of Tet; it would put an end to the long civil war.

The fighting was especially brutal in San Salvador, where guerrillas dug themselves in in the crowded slums, and the military managed to extract them only by bombing and strafing civilian neighborhoods. But the turning point of the offensive, and of the war itself, came during the early hours of November 16th, when commandos scaled the back wall of the shady campus of the University of Central America, roused five Jesuit priests from sleep, ordered them to lie with their faces against the ground, and emptied automatic weapons into their brains. Before they departed, the soldiers killed a sixth priest, the Jesuits’ cook, and her fifteen-year-old daughter. The scene they left behind—the obliterated skulls of the priests, the green lawn soaked in blood and brains, the fantastically redundant number of spent cartridges—was one of spectacular carnage. And though the soldiers made a halfhearted attempt to scrawl a few leftist slogans, it would very shortly become clear that those who had done this work were the men of the Atlacatl.

It was an enormous political blunder, for it said to the world, and especially to the Americans in Congress, that after the billions and billions of dollars and all the fine words about “training” and “reform,” at bottom the Salvadoran Army remained what it had been at El Mozote. But by now Ronald Reagan had gone, and so had the ideological threat he had so feared. The time had come to bring the war to an end.

In the mountains of Morazán, in what was still the red zone, the refugees rebuilt their community. In the Honduran camps, they had made friends among the international aid workers, and now, with help from the European Community and other agencies, they raised up new buildings of straight brown planks: a shoe factory, a handicraft shop, a nursery to hold the children during the day when the people went to work. And they named their community Segundo Monrres, after one of the fallen Jesuits.

On October 26, 1990, Pedro Chicas Romero, of La Joya, who had hidden in a cave above the hamlet as the soldiers killed his relatives and his neighbors, went down to San Francisco Gotera and filed a criminal complaint with the Court of the First Instance, accusing the Atlacatl Battalion of responsibility for the killings in El Mozote and the villages around it, and asking that Judge Federico Ernesto Portillo Campos investigate and punish those responsible. Among the first witnesses to give testimony in the case was Rufina Amaya Márquez.

The investigation proceeded haltingly, and although Tutela Legal, among other human-rights organizations, tried to push the Judge forward—by publishing, in November, 1991, the first full investigation of the El Mozote massacre, including the names of seven hundred and ninety-four dead—it is hard to know what might have come of it had not the government of President Alfredo Cristiani and the comandantes of the F.M.L.N. come together, in Mexico City in January, 1992, and signed an agreement to end the twelve-year-old war. Among other things, the agreement provided that the Army be purged of “known human rights violators” and reduced by half; that the guerrillas disarm and some of their number join a new civilian police force; and that the Atlacatl and the other rapid-reaction battalions be disbanded. The agreement also provided for a “Truth Commission” that would take on “the task of investigating serious acts of violence that have occurred since 1980 and whose impact on society urgently demands that the public should know the truth.”

The experts from the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Unit entered the country in February, and although the investigation was repeatedly stalled, the people of Morazán helped it along (among other things, by staging a boisterous demonstration in front of the Gotera courthouse in April), and so did the three truth Commissioners when they arrived, in June.

Finally, in October, the experts began to dig. And there, on the third day, in the silence of the ruined hamlet of El Mozote, all the words and claims and counterclaims that had been loudly made for nearly eleven years abruptly gave way
before the mute force of material fact. The bones were there, the cartridges were there; the sleeping reality of El Mozote had finally been awoken.

They dug and sifted and charted for thirty-five days, and soon the cartridges and the clothing and the bones and bone fragments, all labelled and packed away in bright manila envelopes and fresh new cartons, would depart El Mozote and travel by car to a laboratory in San Salvador, where the experts worked away into December. The following March, when the United Nations made public the Truth Commission's report, entitled "From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador," the analysis of the evidence was there, laid out for the reader in clear, precise language, each successive sentence demolishing one or another of the myths put forward during the previous twelve years. Of the hundred and forty-three skulls found, all "were deposited during the same temporal event," which is "unlikely to have occurred later than 1981." El Mozote could not have been a guerrilla graveyard, as some had claimed, especially since all but twelve of the one hundred and forty-three remains identified turned out to be those of children under twelve years of age, including at least one fetus, found between the pelvic bones of one of the adults.

The cartridges recovered in the sarcistery showed that "at least twenty-four people participated in the shooting," and the distribution of the shells indicated that they fired "from the window, from the doorway, and probably through a window to the right of the door." Finally, of the two hundred and forty-five cartridge cases that were studied—all but one from American M16 rifles—"184 had discernible headstamps, identifying the ammunition as having been manufactured for the United States Government at Lake City, Missouri."

From this evidence and from a wealth of testimony, the Truth Commission would conclude that "more than 500 identified victims perished at El Mozote and in the other villages. Many other victims have not been identified." To identify them would likely require more exhumations—at other sites in El Mozote, as well as in La Joya and in the other hamlets where the killing took place. But the Truth Commission has finished its report, and, five days after the report was published, the Salvadoran legislature pushed through a blanket amnesty that would bar from prosecution those responsible for El Mozote and other atrocities of the civil war. In view of this, Judge Portillo, after allowing two American anthropologists to work in the hamlet for several weeks with inconclusive results, in effect closed down his investigation. The other victims of El Mozote will continue to lie undiscovered in the soil of Morazán.

Last July, the Secretary of State's Panel on El Salvador, created in the wake of the Truth Commission report, concluded that the Department's handling of the massacre investigation "undermined the Department's credibility pears that a massacre of some kind took place, questions remain," including, the Journal said, "Who were the true perpetrators of this awful crime?"

If you drive out from San Salvador today, along the highway toward Morazán, passing the barracks of the Domingo Monterrosa Third Brigade, and crossing the narrow bridge on the Torola, its wooden planks clattering beneath your wheels, you will find, amid the sorghum and the corn and the tufts of maguey, the clean new buildings of Segundo Montes, housing the boot factory and the handicraft shop and the other factories brought back from the refugee camps. In one of the buildings, you will find the woman who fled La Joya in 1981, was forced to bury her wounded child in the mountains, went mad, and became the witch of El Mozote that the villagers came to fear. Andrea Marquez works in the nursery, caring for the children of Segundo Montes. Farther up the black road, if you step through the barbed wire you will find Rufina Amaya living in a small house with her little girl, Marta, who is now four years old. And if you head up the black road to Perquin, with its battered central square and its mural of the slain Archbishop Romero, you will come to Radio Venceremos, which has

United States Ambassador Deane Hinton with Domingo Monterrosa in March, 1983, fifteen months after the massacre at El Mozote.

with its critics—and probably with the Salvadorans—in a serious way that has not healed." The panel concluded its review by noting that "a massacre had indeed occurred and the U.S. statements on the case were wrong. On December 11, 1992, two Embassy officers went to El Mozote to attend a ceremony honoring those who had died in the massacre."

Only the Wall Street Journal remained more circumspect; in February, in a report from El Mozote on its editorial page, entitled "The War's Over, but El Salvador Still Fights Propaganda Battle," the Journal conceded that while "it app

graduated from its various holes in the ground to an actual building on a nearby hill; concrete, single story, and small, it is a museum now, a gallery to exhibit pictures of the station's former subterranean quarters. Out in front, beside a well-preserved bomb crater with a carefully tended stone-and-flower border, and behind a brass plaque, you will find a dramatically twisted and burned torso of steel. As the people there will tell you, it is what remains of a helicopter that was blown from the sky one fine day, and it happens to be the most cherished monument in all Morazán.